

Becoming **invisible?**

Margaret Ambridge



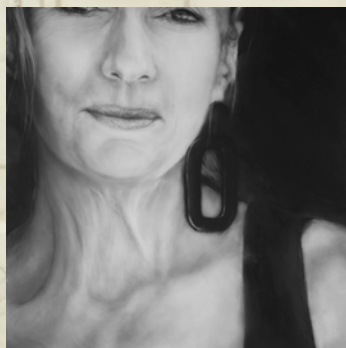
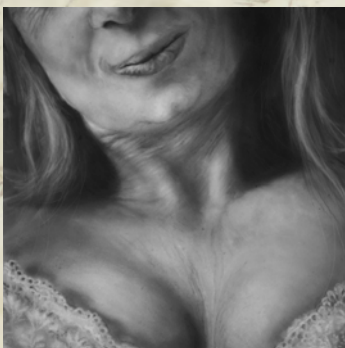
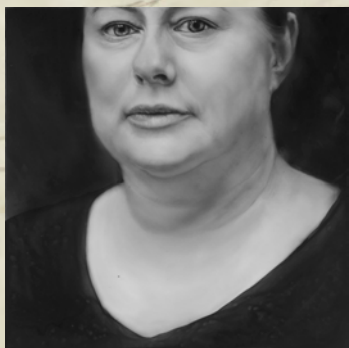
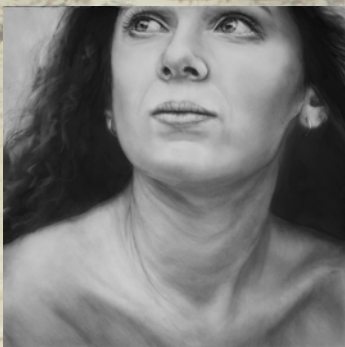
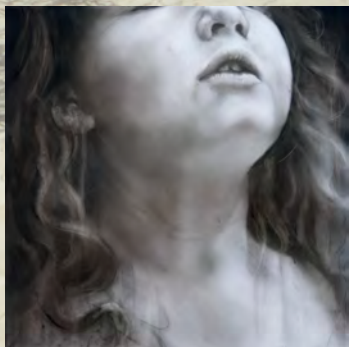
Age creeps up on us with enormous stealth, and while it affects both men and women, it is fair to say we experience it differently.

The American writer Susan Sontag identified the oppressive belief that men are enhanced by age while women are progressively destroyed by it. A woman's age, Sontag insisted, is *'something of a dirty secret'*.

With the premium placed on feminine beauty, older women often find themselves at the terrible nexus of sexism and ageism, and as they approach fifty many notice that the male gaze they have been braced against since puberty is gradually withdrawn. At first it feels like having stepped behind a gauze screen—although still visible, eye contact is cursory; engagement diminishes. As time goes on, invisibility accelerates, perhaps reflecting the hormonal changes in hair and skin and even scent, brought about by the menopause.

Eventually, there is nothing to push against, or in some cases to be supported by. The loss matters more to some women than to others, and despite the freedom from surveillance it heralds it is still a sobering moment, a rite of passage unimaginable on the by-now distant battlefields of youth.

Older women fade not only from the male gaze, but from every gaze: younger people of both sexes do not see them; children do not see them. After being for so long under constant scrutiny, when the gaze of the world is



Front cover | *Wedding party*

Inside left panel | *Miss size 1B*

Centre panel L-R from top left | *Me at: 10, 16, 35, 47, 51, 71, 75, 90, 102*

Outer fold | *Souls*

Back cover | *Me at 10, 16, 18, 19*

withdrawn it is as if a gale force wind has ceased to blow after a life spent at sea. One must develop new land legs. There must be a re-balancing.

In *Becoming invisible?* Margaret Ambridge invites women and girls to consider how they will navigate their youth, future ageing, and mortality. Through conversations with a broad cross-section of women she has painstakingly gathered the material for this collection of intimate portraits. As with previous solo exhibitions, Margaret has interpreted this new challenge through her chosen medium of charcoal on semi-translucent drafting film, as well as on the tissue paper of old sewing patterns, a combination of elements as delicate and ephemeral as the nature of identity.

With exquisite precision and a sure touch, Margaret has observed and recorded the almost imperceptible changes etched by time on women's bodies, focusing in particular on the fine skin of their throats where the lines sometimes referred to as *collier de Venus*, or Venus's necklace, have traditionally been regarded as revealing a woman's true age.

Her conversations with participants have explored their feelings about beauty, ageing, and the impending invisibility and erasing wrought by old age. The portraits form a timeline, punctuated by commentary from each decade. Suspended over all are Margaret's avatars constructed from dressmaking tissue. Fragile but bold, these ghostly creations are part garment, part woman, part dreamlike configuration of art and women's histories.

On the question of visibility, consider how the great Victorian art critic and thinker John Ruskin addressed the philosophical question of whether the word 'Blue' means the sensation of colour which the human eye receives upon gazing at the open sky, or at a bell gentian. *If the 'sensation [of blueness] can only be felt when the eye is turned to the object, and as, therefore, no such sensation is produced by the object when nobody looks at it, therefore the thing, when it is not looked at, is not blue'.*

The same argument can be applied to other experiences, for example to whether sweetness exists if there is no tongue with the capacity of taste, or even, perhaps, whether a woman, if she is not looked at, can



appear to be 'old'. This view concludes that it does not matter what things are in themselves, that their truth depends upon their appearance to the viewer.

In accepting this, women have become complicit in their own erasing, which is really an extension of the power of the male gaze. Ruskin, though, is clear in his conclusion: *'The word 'Blue' does not mean the sensation caused by a gentian on the human eye; but it means the power of producing that sensation: and this power is always there, in the thing, whether we are present to experience it or not, and would remain there "though there were not left a man on the face of the earth"'*. Ruskin likens the power of blue to the power of gunpowder to explode.

If women apply Ruskin's reasoning to their own visibility, whether they are seen or not, they will always have the explosive power of their womanhood.

If you do not see us when you look at us, it is not our loss, but yours.

Dr Carol Lefevre | Visiting Research Fellow, University of Adelaide



Exhibition Opening

Penny Griggs | CEO Central School of Art

Forum

Participants | Dr Tiffany Brooks, Liz Butler, Alice Colgrave, Dr Carol Lefeyre, Peta-Ann Louth, India Trestrail, Margaret Ambridge

Moderator | Dr Gabrielle Cehic AM MBBS FRACP FAANMS

Sponsors

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Special thanks

Mark Fitz-Gerld | Photography | Video | Design

Marjorie Fitz-Gerald OAM | Toile

Julia Robinson

Claire

Guildhouse, SALA

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25 Aug—16 Sep 2022

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